THE HARWOOD Museum of Art

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

NICHOLAS HERRERA

EL RITO SANTERO

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HERRERA

Nicholas Herrera: El Rito Santero is a glimpse into the life and works of master santero Nicholas Herrera. With a spirituality that transcends religion, Herrera adapts New Mexican Catholic folk subjects and symbolism into both established sacred figures and modern-day secular and social contexts. Herrera creates bultos, retablos, and large-scale mixed media works, many of which intimately detail rich and often challenging chapters in his storied life. This exhibition surveys Herrera's personal identity, family history, relationship to place, and political ideology. Still a "village artist," Herrera continues to reside, regenerate, and create on the land of his family.

The Harwood Museum of Art is proud to exhibit the first solo museum exhibition of Nicholas Herrera.

Nicholas Herrera's ancestors, the Herrera de la Cruz family, were among the earliest Spanish settlers who came to New Mexico in 1598. Herrera's ancestry includes Spanish as well as Mexican and Comanche lineage, which he proudly refers to as "mestizo." In the 1800s, the Herrera family were the first to move to the El Rito mountains. Juan de la Cruz, Herrera's great-great-grandfather, farmed potatoes in the summer on a homestead above El Rito in Potrero Canyon. The potato crop was used for, among other things, the creation of potato vodka which was then traded with the Comanche tribe. In the winters, de la Cruz would move to El Rito and run a feed store. Nicholas Herrera's great-great-grandmother, Rosa Vilpando, was taken captive in the Comanche raids on Ranchos de Taos in the 1700s, and birthed children who were citizens of the tribal nation.

Herrera still resides on the land of his ancestral family and derives inspiration and natural materials from the property. His uncle, the famous Santero de la Muerte (Saint-maker of Death) José Inés Herrera, lived in Herrera's Potrero Canyon cabin. José Inés (active from the late 1800s to early 1900s) earned this moniker because he specialized in carving death carts and death figures. This was an important sculptural tradition that originated in the Middle Ages, traveled to the Southwest in the late 1500s, and was utilized by the Penitente Brotherhood of Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado in their Easter processions. Herrera's grandfather later used José Inés's mountain cabin, and as a child, Herrera rode with his father on horseback to visit the structure. When Herrera's daughter Elena was born, he took her up to the cabin to "meet" her ancestors.

Herrera was born in El Rito on July 11, 1964, to Celia and Pedro Herrera—conspicuously the same year that principal santero Patrociño Barela died (as Herrera likes to note). Pedro Herrera was a janitor at Los Alamos National Laboratory and a furniture craftsman during the Works Progress Administration. Pedro Herrera is descended from the genízaros of Abiquiu. In the specific context of Abiquiu, New Mexico, genízaros were individuals who were often captured or traded as slaves from various Indigenous groups, potentially Jicarilla Apache in Herrera's instance, and then assimilated into Hispanic communities. Celia Herrera was a foundational support and influence in the life of Herrera, her youngest of six children. Celia fostered her son's creativity by encouraging artistic endeavors such as painting stones and repurposing materials into art, remaining a steadfast supporter of his artistic pursuits. When Celia passed away, Herrera laid her to rest in the ground beneath his home chapel, near his primary residence.

Herrera struggled in school but showed an affinity for artmaking from an early age. His desk was carved with outlaw stick figures holding guns and

"wanted" signs, as well as profanities and corazónes (sacred hearts). When Herrera was fifteen, his brother discovered a stockpile of Herrera's carved animals and snakes and took them to Canyon Road in Santa Fe where he quickly sold the lot for $250.

When he graduated from high school, Herrera worked for the forest service as a firefighter and later joined a road crew at Los Alamos National Laboratory. As a young man, Herrera found himself enmeshed in a lifestyle of drugs, alcohol, guns, fast cars, and bar fights. Herrera had multiple encounters with the police, spanning drunken overnighters to six months in jail for reckless driving on a revoked license while carrying a concealed weapon.[1] This dangerous existence nearly ended Herrera's life.

It was a frigid wintry night in the mountains of New Mexico in 1990. Herrera's new Yugo was destroyed; the other driver's truck was beyond repair. After drinking too much and driving too fast, Herrera had crashed his car into another vehicle and now lay motionless in a deep snowbank, unconscious and barely alive. Suffering from a concussion, severe back injuries, and a set of broken ribs, Herrera was nearly gone.

One man at the scene of the accident—a tall, long-haired "hippie"—stayed with Herrera and covered his body with a blanket until he could be transported to the hospital. This mysterious bystander, a Good Samaritan or an angel, is a revisited symbol in Herrera's work. At the hospital, Herrera had what he describes as a near-death experience, in which Jesus Christ and the skeletal La Muerte form, an iconic figure crafted by his uncle José Inés Herrera, staged an otherworldly tug-of-war for Herrera's body and soul.

When Herrera left the hospital two weeks later, he was transformed. Herrera believes that the nameless man who helped him at the scene of the wreck was the embodiment of Christ; he saw the intervention as a sign to quit his day job as a construction worker and pursue his dream of making art full-time.

Now, decades after the accident, Herrera is widely considered to be one of the United States' most important folk artists. Herrera has exhibited in New York, Chicago, and Paris, and his works are included in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (Washington, D.C.), the American Folk Art Museum (New York, New York), and the Museum of International Folk Art (Santa Fe, New Mexico).

David Michael Kennedy, *Nicholas Herrera 1, 2009*, palladium print edition of 10, 16 x 16 in. Courtesy of David Michael Kennedy.

[1] During one stint in jail, Herrera sketched works of art on sheets of paper and traded these with the guard for packs of cigarettes. After releasing him, the guard informed Herrera that his wife was curator at Fuller Lodge and wanted to exhibit his artwork. This would result in Herrera's first ever art exhibition.

Nicholas Herrera, *La Bendición de Los Muertos*, 2016, hand carved painted wood with natural pigments, 16 x 28 x 12.5 in. Courtesy of the Travis Family Collection.

RELIGIOUS ART OF NEW MEXICO

Herrera is the inheritor of Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado Hispanic religious traditions extending back to the 1700s. Beginning with early Spanish settlers, the production of saints using wood and natural pigments allowed communities to practice Catholicism in a challenging and isolating new land. Workshops were established to fill the needs of churches and chapels in the production of saints or santos. Later devotional artists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries utilized materials like tin, household paints, modern pigments, and mass-produced lithographs of saints to support their local parishes.

The santeros of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not have formal artistic training; Pedro Antonio Fresquís (1749–1831), Antonio Molleno (c. 1800–1845), José Rafael Aragón (c. 1796–1862), and their followers were self-taught, a common characteristic now applied to those we deem "folk artists" like Herrera.[2]

With the creation of the Santa Fe Trail (1821) and the influence of railroads in New Mexico (1880), lithographs, plaster images, and other forms of cheap reproductions of saints became readily available, leading to a decline in hand-painted and carved santos. The santero tradition, while almost lost, was kept alive by the Penitente Brotherhood (also known as the Brotherhood of Our Father Jesus the Nazarene or Los Hermanos Penitentes), a lay religious society active in Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado. This group continued to use passion figures in their moradas, religious meeting buildings, during observances on Lent and Holy Week.

In the early 1900s, the santos tradition began to experience a revival with the founding of the Spanish Colonial Arts Society (still in existence) by Frank Applegate, Mary Austin, and their friends. Hispanic artists, craftsmen, and santeros in New Mexico were also encouraged by the Federal Art Project, organized through the Works Progress Administration.

In 1926, the Spanish Colonial Arts Society founded Spanish Market in Santa Fe, the oldest and largest juried show of its kind in the nation. Nicholas Herrera was juried into the prestigious market in 1988 and removed himself in 1997, choosing to distance himself from the strict traditional regulations and internal politics. By using contemporary themes in the modality of traditional devotional art, Herrera and fellow revolutionary santero Luis Tapia forever changed the medium, expanding what was possible using santos' symbologies, materials, and artistic techniques.

[2] Folk art encompasses a diverse array of artistic expressions rooted in cultural traditions, often created by artists without classical training. These artworks capture the essence of everyday life, community rituals, and spiritual beliefs, serving as visual narratives of cultural identity.

WORKS OF ART

PROTECT AND SERVE

In 1997, Nicholas Herrera received the esteemed honor of having a work of art, *Protect and Serve* (1994), accessioned into the Smithsonian American Art Museum's permanent collection.

Herrera had many run-ins with authority while growing up in El Rito, New Mexico, and policemen often appear in his sculptures. In *Protect and Serve*, Jesus sits in the backseat of a police car driven by two officers. The quote, "Forgive them Lord, they know not what they do, man," suggests that the sculpture is a contemporary take on Christ's capture by Pontius Pilate's guards. From the other side, the signs say, "Welcome to the Land of Enchantment," New Mexico's state slogan, and "Gringo Hills 30 miles," which implies a wealthy, White district. Herrera makes a connection between the crucifixion of Christ and the persecution of minorities in America, particularly by the police. The title *Protect and Serve* is an ironic take on the well-known police motto. It also refers to the painting of a saint on the underside of the car's roof (a reference to Norteño lowrider culture), performing as a guardian angel for the driver. Lowrider cars are a prominent aspect of Hispanic cultural identity in northern New Mexico and are also commonly associated with Catholic imagery and practice.

When asked about this work today, Herrera says the topic is more poignant than ever. "Cops can arrest you for things you didn't even do. The prejudice and the unjustness that Christ felt during the crucifixion has a lot of similarities to the racism in this country today. If Christ were to return to earth, he might be arrested by the police," says Herrera.

Nicholas Herrera skillfully weaves politics into his artwork, creating pieces that serve as both a form of expression and activism. Herrera draws inspiration from his heritage, the socio-political issues affecting his community, and the Chicano art movement.

The Chicano movement emerged during the civil rights movement in the 1960s, primarily in the Southwestern United States. It was a response to the marginalization and discrimination experienced by Mexican Americans. Artists within this movement sought to reclaim their cultural identity and challenge dominant narratives through their art. Central themes included cultural pride, social justice, and the struggle for equality.

Herrera's artwork embodies these themes, often addressing issues such as immigration, labor rights, and environmental justice. Through his paintings, sculptures, and installations, he offers a nuanced commentary on the complex intersection of culture, politics, and identity.

Herrera's work subverts traditional devotional paintings to depict contemporary political narratives. These retablos feature icons of Chicano culture, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, alongside symbols of resistance and resilience. By blending religious imagery with political commentary, Herrera challenges viewers to reconsider the intersections of faith and activism within the Chicano experience.

Herrera's use of mixed media and found objects adds layers of meaning to his art. He incorporates materials like scrap metal, reclaimed wood, and discarded items, drawing attention to issues of environmental degradation and economic inequality. Through these unconventional mediums, Herrera not only reflects the realities of life in rural communities but also underscores the resourcefulness and creativity he sees in Chicano culture.

Nicholas Herrera, *Protect and Serve*, 1994, painted wood, metal, hair, plastic, 13 3/4 x 38 3/4 x 16 3/8 in. Courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment.

EL RITO SCENES

Herrera's village life paintings of El Rito transport viewers to a world of simple realism, nostalgic atmosphere, vibrant color, and bustling activity, all played out in a rural mountain community. The paintings are a veritable representation of life in El Rito.

The town of El Rito, located fifteen minutes from Abiquiu and forty-five minutes from Santa Fe, has a population of 898. El Rito was one of the first Spanish settlements in Northern New Mexico and holds the oldest church in New Mexico. When asked about his hometown, Herrera says, "El Rito is still in the 1800s," an aspect he cherishes for the quiet and space it provides. Herrera remains an active figure in town, known locally for cruising dirt roads in his lowrider cars and carving colorful santos in the New Mexican tradition.

In his many works about El Rito, Herrera situates the painting's perspective above the town, as if watched from a high hillside. Just like the energetic artist behind the works, the scenes are busy—with people, animals, vehicles, ice-skating, dancing, church services, and frequently a ceremony or special occasion. The background is always the iconic El Rito hills and mountains. Frequently, an important local figure from El Rito or a friend of Herrera's can be spotted in the fold. The village church and the nearby morada are still the cultural center of town where holy days and fiestas are celebrated. This El Rito community is still dependent upon faith and hard work for survival.

One of Herrera's most powerful scenes is *Matachines* (2012). Matachines dances are performed by both Native American tribes and Hispano individuals on ceremonial feast days in New Mexico. The central figure to the dance, Abuelo, is larger than the other costumed figures and is the disciplinarian who confronts evil. The colors are vibrant and speak to the bustling activity and organized chaos the dance portrays; the skill with which Herrera articulates each costumed figure is mesmerizing in its technical acumen and inimitable artistic style.

HOT RODS

Since the time that a young Herrera joined his father, Pedro, to forage for treasure at the local junkyard, the artist has held a fascination for all things on wheels: bicycles, tricycles, motorcycles, trucks, and cars. Automobiles have remained a persisting character in his artwork and life.

In 1990, Herrera found a 1939 Chevrolet Coupe in a ditch—the frame riddled with bullet holes, the inside swimming with dirt. Herrera and friends fully restored the antique automobile, initially painting it white with murals, and later turning it completely black with red, coffin-like upholstery. The sleek, pitch-black Coupe is now fully unified with the man, myth, and legend that is Nicholas Herrera.

In his artwork, saints and contemporary individuals alike are seen driving cars, bikes, and trucks. In *Lowrider Nativity* (2005), the three wisemen have volunteered to babysit the baby Jesus Christ to let new parents Mary and Joseph enjoy a date night out. The three kings, each riding stripped-down and souped-up motorcycles associated with the New Mexico lowrider scene, escort Mary and Joseph. Traditional saint references seamlessly intermingle with the delightful narrative of Herrera's imagining.

THE SACRED

Nicholas Herrera's signature saint is a bright, blue-cloaked Virgin of Guadalupe. She repeats throughout his work as a striking solitary bulto, as well as a supporting figure in narrative scenes of bultos, retablos, and altars.

Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe or the Virgin of Guadalupe) is the patron saint of Mexico. In sixteenth-century images in and around Mexico City, the Virgin wears a rose-colored gown and a blue-green cloak, hands clasped to her breast, head tilting slightly to the right. She is shown standing on a halfmoon held aloft by an angel, her body surrounded by the spiked rays of a golden halo. Herrera's interpretation of the Virgin is true to the Mexico City iconography of this important saint.

The Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego, an Aztec convert to Christianity, on December 9,

Nicholas Herrera, *Lowrider Nativity*, 2005, carved wood, natural and acrylic pigments, cloth, old toy wheels, and found metal objects, 60 x 42 1/2 x 24 in. Courtesy of Curt and Christina Nonomaque.

and again on December 12, 1531. During her first apparition, she requested that a shrine be built in her honor on the spot where she appeared: Tepeyac Hill (now in a suburb of Mexico City). The bishop demanded a sign before he would approve construction of a church. Mary then appeared for the second time to Juan Diego and ordered him to collect roses. In a second encounter with the bishop, Juan Diego opened his cloak and let dozens of roses fall to the floor, revealing the image of Mary imprinted on the inside of his cloak.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is notable for having a darker complexion than other saints, due in part to the fact that her figure was directed at Indigenous peoples for hopeful conversion. Scholar Jeannette Favrot Peterson argues that the now-canonized iconography of the Virgin of Guadalupe is a fusion of the Christian Mother of God with Aztec mother goddesses.[3] Like the pre-conquest earth mothers, the Virgin symbolized fertility and protected against disease and natural disasters. The decision to fuse the Virgin and the Aztec earth deities may have been intentional to bolster the Catholic Church's attempts to break through the persisting practices of traditional Indigenous religious beliefs and practices.

Nicholas Herrera proudly proclaims his ancestral heritage as "mestizo," a combination of Spanish, Mexican, and Comanche. In works like *La Bendición de Los Muertos* (2016), Herrera celebrates the three cultural communities that define who he is and what Northern New Mexico represents. The Virgin of Guadalupe stands as the quintessential repeated motif and moniker for the artist. For Herrera, the Virgin of Guadalupe serves as a poignant symbol of multicultural pride, encapsulating the diverse communities that define his identity and the rich tapestry of Northern New Mexico's cultural heritage.

WHEEL OF LIFE

In his magnum opus *Wheel of Life* (2003), Herrera narrates the intimate history that defines him as an artist. The wheel begins with his birth surrounded by proud Celia and Pedro, then quickly shifts to his developmental years. Herrera stands atop a hot rod of his own creation from the junk gathered with his father, before finding himself in a classroom struggling to succeed under the limited and normative definitions of success in the American education system. He is seen scared as a young child next to a kitchen table while his parents argue, with Pedro holding a bottle of alcohol. He studies the floor in shame while he is chastised for getting in trouble, yet again.

As a young man, Herrera finds community in the Penitente Brotherhood. Herrera joined the legacy of his father and grandfather in this religious sect and was an active member for many years. His experiences with this storied Northern New Mexican group are detailed in other works by Herrera.

As the wheel turns, Herrera is seen facing demons, fighting addiction, and being marched into a jail cell by police officers, all before experiencing the car crash that would forever alter his life.

Herrera embraces his destiny as a santero with a new expression of confidence and joy. At the apex of the circle, Herrera is joined by then-girlfriend Susan, her daughter, Addi, and the joy of his life, his daughter Elena. The wheel speaks to the persistently changing circumstances of a life lived and the inevitability of moving forward—but also the dangers of falling back. The story told is one of difficult and tragic experiences, resulting in the complex artist known and respected today. As Herrera says, "what makes a good artist is what experiences you have in life. You gotta go through hell to make good art."

[3] Peterson, Jeanette Favrot. "The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest or Liberation?" Art Journal 51, no. 4, Latin American Art (Winter, 1992): 39-47.

Nicholas Herrera is beloved as a “folk artist” and the “cool vato” of the New Mexico santeros. Just as his art enchants, so too does the man behind the work. Herrera has a rich history of supporting others to find their own artistic paths and in giving back to the community. He has taught the art of retablos to young school children and troubled teens, and once galvanized a group of respected artists to create an altar screen for a renovated church. Deeply religious and irreverent, hot-headed and generous, hilarious and thoughtful, he confronts the viewer with his take on the world in a way that could restore one’s faith in humanity. As Herrera says about his art, “I don’t hold back in my work because of tradition. I make that which has never been made before and I will use whatever it takes to make a point.”

Nicholas Herrera: El Rito Santero provides an unprecedented look into the life and artistry of master santero Nicholas Herrera. Through a captivating array of bultos, retablos, and mixed media works, Herrera’s spiritual journey unfolds, transcending the boundaries of religion to delve into the heart of New Mexican Catholic folk tradition. From his deeply personal exploration of family lineage and village life to his poignant commentary on social and political issues, Herrera’s artwork reflects the complexities of his storied past and the rich cultural tapestry of Northern New Mexico. As visitors immerse themselves in Herrera’s energetic narratives and dynamic imagery, they are invited to witness the transformative power of art and the enduring legacy of one of America’s most important folk artists.

Curated by Nicole Dial-Kay, *Curator of Exhibitions + Collections*
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